

You may not know Tate, but your kids likely do; Right-wing influencer was charged with sex trafficking and rape in Romania this week

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Body

Nittyta Rizza, a teacher in Markham, first Googled Andrew Tate after one of her Grade 12 students asked if they could have a debate about him - and what she found alarmed her.

"It was horrifying," she says.

The 36-year-old right-wing influencer and self-proclaimed misogynist rocketed into the headlines this week after he was detained and charged with sex trafficking and rape in Romania. Many people were left scratching their heads about why, exactly, the former kickboxer and "Big Brother" contestant was generating so much attention.

But if you don't know who he is, there's a good chance your teenage kids do.

In an age when parents can no longer walk by the family computer to see what exactly their kids are consuming online, some educators say Tate rose to prominence while kids were out of in-person schooling due to the pandemic, missed out on opportunities to socialize in person and have been overly reliant on social media platforms to fill the gaps.

Tate's fans say he's arguing for the rights of men. But his critics say that along the way he promotes views that may radicalize some young boys against women - he was banned from Twitter in 2017 after tweeting that women who are raped "must bare some responsibility" (sic). (His account was recently reinstated after the platform was bought by Elon Musk.) He has also argued that women are men's property and shouldn't be allowed to drive. Furthermore, he's doing so using social media platforms their parents may not be taking seriously.

He "has a lot of emotional appeal to this younger generation of men who are dejected and lonely, and who haven't been properly socialized," Rizza says. "They think they can be empowered and gain social capital with what Andrew Tate is teaching them."

Here's what you need to know about Tate.

Tate rose to prominence in 2016 as a contestant on "Big Brother," and he has since built a massive following on Instagram before his page was taken down, with fans sharing his content independently on TikTok. The hashtag #AndrewTate surpassed 13.7 billion views on the platform.

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While some of his content has seen him facing bans online, his alleged real-world choices led to more severe action this week, with police in Romania detaining and charging him and his brother, Tristan, with sex trafficking and rape.

According to Romanian police, the brothers conspired with Romanian citizens to trick women into coming to their villa in Bucharest, reported the New York Daily News. Once the women arrived, they were physically and psychologically intimidated, then forced to stay and film pornographic videos, police said.

Tate has said he used to have "girlfriends" work for his successful online webcam business.

Investigators said at least one victim was allegedly raped twice, and six alleged victims were rescued from the compound.

Earlier in the week, Tate had tangled online with Greta Thunberg, the celebrated 19-year-old Swedish climate activist. On Tuesday, Tate tweeted a photo of him beside a Bugatti and tagged boasting about owning 33 cars and asking for her email address so he can send her a "complete list of my car collection and their respective enormous emissions."

After she slapped him down, he tweeted another video smoking a cigar and taunting her further with a pizza box on the table in front of him - Jerry's Pizza, a shop in Romania. Twitter users said this is part of the reason Romanian authorities were able to pinpoint his location and arrest him, but police said this is untrue.

The online bout was more in line with what Tate has previously been known for.

Just as TikTok was gaining popularity among youth during the pandemic, videos of Tate were gaining popularity, as were his words about how women can't drive, shouldn't leave the home, are men's property and are less worthy if they have a long dating history. They frequently appeared in clipped videos posted by other users.

Rizza's entire Grade 12 class in Markham knew of Tate and engaged with his often hate-filled content online, fuelled in part by the pandemic, social isolation and increased time spent behind screens.

In her experience, her students and other young men turned to Tate after feeling targeted by the #MeToo movement, feminism and rumours of them sexually assaulting girls.

Luc Cousineau, an instructor at Waterloo University who researches masculinity, misogyny and men's-rights activism, places Tate into the category of "right-wing misogynist grifters" - which includes "pickup artists" and others who appeal to young men that feel disenfranchised and left behind by a society that has emphasized women's rights.

There are a few dynamics that set Tate apart from other right-wing online personalities who prey on young men's insecurities about wealth and relationships for monetary gain, Cousineau said. Most important, Cousineau argues that Tate encourages violence.

"What effect does it have, if you are for example a new woman-identifying teacher in your mid-20s who is starting out in say, a high school classroom, and you've got 16, 17, 18-year-old boys who subscribe to Andrew Tate ... your students have subscribed" to someone encouraging violence against you, he said.

Also notable is Tate's ability to make his content go viral.

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"What's new about Andrew Tate is he figured out the algorithm ... it's a bit of a mystery how this came about, but either he figured it out or somebody in his team really figured out how to leverage his presence, on TikTok in particular," Cousineau said.

Tate has since been banned from TikTok, and the platform said content featuring him would be removed earlier this year. Still, the hashtag #andrewtatequotes hit 1.1 billion views, with the same content they said would be removed readily available to watch.

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